

Women Empowerment through Ecotourism Activities in Lower Kinabatangan Area of Sabah, East Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, women participation in ecotourism activities is a growing phenomenon, yet studies in this area are still in their infancy. Consequently, this paper seeks to identify women participation in ecotourism activities that empower them to be involved actively. Guided by Scheyvens's Empowerment Framework (SEF), this study has identified several factors that contributed positively towards their participation in ecotourism activities as well as empower them at four levels such as psychological, social, political and economic. This study was carried out in Abai Village, Lower Kinabatangan, Sabah, from September to November 2014. Primary data were collected through face-to-face in-depth interviews with the women who were engaged in ecotourism activities in Abai Village. In addition, field observations and secondary resources were also utilised to strengthen the research findings. The findings revealed that, women in Abai Village are seriously and actively involved in ecotourism activities, and then this involvement has directly or indirectly empowered them aforementioned empowerment's levels. This study has significant contributions to the tourism industry in Malaysia, where women participation in development projects such as ecotourism activities in rural areas of Malaysia enhances their lifestyle politically, economically, psychologically and socially.

Keywords: *women empowerment; abai village; ecotourism activities; participation.*

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been considered a significant income contributor to the country and can make a tremendous contribution to people's lives as well as to the environment (Jucan & Jucan, 2013). It is also widely acknowledged that tourism is a fast growing industry and is growing with a great pace (Dogra & Gupta, 2012). To many developing countries basically they are utilizing

tourism as an important tool to increase domestic and foreign investment (Akama, 2002; Jenkins, 1982; Hitchcock, King & Parnwell, 2009; Campbell, 1999), job opportunities (Yacob, et al. 2007), development of infrastructure and communication facilities (Bhuiyan, et al. 2011), foreign exchange earnings for a country (Magigi & Ramadhani, 2013), as well as local community development (Hussin, 2008, 2009; Magigi & Ramadhani, 2013). Tourism sector in Malaysia can be categorised as at a decent level. This can be proved by the number of tourist arrivals in the country which has increased by 25.03 million, registering a total expenditure of MYR60.6 billion (USD 46.26 billion) in 2012 differing from the previous year, which only recorded a turnover of 24.71 million tourist arrivals and total expenditure of MYR58.3 billion (Tourism Malaysia, 2014). Therefore, tourism has the same great potential compared to other sectors such as manufacturing and agricultural sectors.

Table 1

Tourists Arrivals and Receipts to Malaysia (2006-2012)

Year	Arrivals	Receipts (RM)
2012	25.03 Million	60.6 Billion
2011	24.71 Million	58.3 Billion
2010	24.58 Million	56.5 Billion
2009	23.65 Million	53.4 Billion
2008	22.05 Million	49.6 Billion
2007	20.97 Million	46.1 Billion
2006	17.55 Million	36.3 Billion

Source: www.tourism.gov.my

The tourism sector in Malaysia is a growing sector and the role to be played by the government is increasingly important. The Malaysian government is apprehensive in introducing effective measures to advance of the tourism sector for the economic benefits. The government has introduced a number of policies to promote the development of tourism, such as Malaysia Plan Outline, Outline of the Tenth Malaysia's Economic Transformation Program (ETP), National Tourism Policy (NTP), National Physical Planning and Local Agenda 21 (LA 21). The main agency in the tourism sector in Malaysia is the Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia, better known as MOTAC. Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia serves as a catalyst for broader measures that could increase the potential of Malaysia's tourism sector at the stage of the world. In order to efficiently launch the progress of the implementation of these measures, the government has sufficient funds and adequate infrastructure to develop the tourism sector (Bhuiyan, Siwar

& Ismail, 2013). By 2020, the tourism industry in Malaysia has aimed to contribute MYR103.6 billion (USD 32.37 billion) in Gross National Income and tourist arrivals are expected to be 36 million (Nair, Munikrishnan, Rajaratnam & King, 2014). The Malaysian government gives serious attention in the development of tourism in order to achieve this target.

In relation to this, the rural tourism products in Malaysia mainly include homestays, ecotourism, agrotourism, cultural and heritage-based tourism, have the great potential to generate income and economic benefits to the country, as well as enhancing the local community livelihoods. Ecotourism in Malaysia is a growing sector and was recognised in the national development plans such as the National Ecotourism Plan 1996. The National Ecotourism Plan was developed and intended to provide a general framework to assist the government to develop the country's ecotourism potential. This plan was developed on the basis of economic, socio-cultural and environmental concern and to sustain profits. Government agency that is responsible to implement this National Ecotourism Plan 1996 is also the Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC) by ensuring that the ecotourism activities are in line with the objective of the plan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender and Tourism

Previous studies have mentioned that the tourism is a tool for economic, social and political empowerment of women (Scheyvens, 1999; Jucan & Jucan, 2013). The engagement of women in tourism activities is essential and can be seen in the development policies. In United Nation's Millennium Development Goal (MDG), five out of eight goals are directly and indirectly related to women empowerment (Jucan & Jucan, 2013). As Ferguson (2007) stated, women engagement in tourism development have been considered vital for current era and being acknowledged by United Nation World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO). Moreover, Ferguson claimed that tourism development may, in theory, contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment policies are vital to be introduced in order to achieve the objectives of the development policies. Although, the global development policies have recognised women's participation in tourism policies, the studies regarding to what extent women being empowered by the tourism is paid less attention to in previous literatures with a few exceptions (Osman, Ahmad, Ahmad, Husin, Abu Bakar & Tanwir, 2009; Isaac & Conrad-J. Wuleka, 2012; Rout & Mohanty, 2015). In Malaysia, studies on women participation in ecotourism activities is a growing phenomenon, yet studies

in this area are still in their infancy. To bridge the gap, this research adopted Scheyvens's Empowerment Framework (1999) which determines four dimensions of empowerment: economic, psychological, social and political. This study's framework is to examine how ecotourism activities can enhance women empowerment in relation to tourism development and management from the local's perspective. Therefore, to achieve the research objectives of this study, a case of Abai Village in the Lower Kinabatangan of Sabah has been selected.

The Concept of Empowerment in Tourism Studies

The concept of empowerment in tourism studies have been popularised by Scheyvens in year 1999. She has published her work entitled 'ecotourism and the empowerment of local communities' in Tourism Management Journal. For Scheyvens (1999) the empowerment framework could provide a mechanism to measure effectiveness of ecotourism initiatives with regards to tourism impacts on local community (Scheyvens, 1999). By having this empowerment framework, community based ecotourism actors can avoid the potential problems in the ecotourism operation and management.

The definition of empowerment is controversial and there is no universally agreed definition of this concept (Andrews, Barbera, Mickle & Novik, 2013). However, Andrews, et al. (2013) have agreed that the term empowerment should be combined with both an economic and social perspective in the definition. Thus, they adapted the empowerment definition which is coined by Alsop and Heinsohn's definition that emphasized more "capacity building view of empowerment". Empowerment, therefore, can be defined as the enhancement "of an individual's or group's capacity to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes" (Andrews, et al. 2013). According to Scheyvens (1999), empowerment could be classified into four dimensions of community capacity such as economic, social, psychological and political with regards to ecotourism studies.

First, the economic empowerment refers to a fair distribution of economic benefits or gains generating income through tourism activities by the local communities especially the disadvantaged groups including women and poor villagers rather than external parties (Scheyvens, 1999; Park & Kim, 2014). Moreover, economic empowerment can also be defined as "increasing fiscal means and power in a women's life such as an increase in income as well as position in the household" (Andrews, et al. 2013). Park & Kim (2014) agreed that economic empowerment "expects to provide long-term fiscal benefits to the local communities and create small business ownership".

Second, the psychological empowerment refers to the extent to which the “local community optimistic about their future, has faith in the abilities of its residents, is relatively self-reliant and demonstrates pride in traditions and culture” (Scheyvens, 1999). In other words, the pride and recognition from the outsiders towards the local community’s works make the local community psychologically empowered, for instance, towards their hand-made handicrafts. Moreover, the recognition not only increase the community-pride but also make the local community to be involved in tourism activities with more enthusiasm and have an actual interest to share their traditional knowledge with the tourists (Timothy, 2007; Park & Kim, 2014).

Third, the social empowerment could be defined as a sense of ownership by the local people towards any tourism projects in their respective destinations. Again Scheyvens (1999) defined social empowerment in the context of ecotourism as “a situation in which a community’s sense of cohesion and integrity has been confirmed or strengthened by an activity such as ecotourism”. Study by Park & Kim (2014) indicated that local community in Goolwa strongly supported the tourism activities. They were actively involved in the local events and community garden projects, thus, empowered them socially. This study showed that the sustainable tourism development could be realised if the local community actively participate in tourism activities (Tosun, 2005) and could receive benefits upon their participation.

Finally, the political empowerment is also considered as one of the significant dimensions in the Scheyvens’s empowerment framework. As Scheyvens (1999) argued that “if a community is to be politically empowered by ecotourism, their voices and their concerns should guide the development of any ecotourism projects from the feasibility stage through to its implementation”. The local community in the tourist destination could have some voice in the ecotourism development involving all age groups including women, youths and elders. To achieve the sustainable tourism, the development projects must involve local community participation in decision making process because it is vital for sustainability. This research, therefore, adopts these four dimensions of empowerment to understand how women’s empowerment is achieved through ecotourism activities in Abai Village, Lower Kinabatangan. There is still limited definition of women empowerment in tourism studies, and there is a need for the development of a women empowerment framework in tourism literature, particularly the terms of conceptual definition in order to expand the body of knowledge. Thus, for this research, had termed and operationalised women empowerment through ecotourism as “the continuous active participation women in ecotourism activities where they realised they realised the potential benefits of ecotourism

activities which empower them socially, economically, environmentally and politically, as well as acknowledging ecotourism as an alternative source for their livelihood.

METHODOLOGY

Based on the previous literature, it was noted that there has been little research on women empowerment in ecotourism activities in Abai Village, Lower Kinabatangan, Sabah, East Malaysia. Thus, qualitative exploratory research is seen as relevant to examine how women's empowerment is achieved through ecotourism activities. The study was carried out in three months' period of time starting from September to November 2014. The primary data for this study was collected through a series of in-depth interviews with women and community leader of Abai Village. A purposive sampling technique (Sekaran, 1992) was employed in this study because all the respondents have the experience in managing ecotourism activities in Abai Village. Therefore, they have the best position to provide data for this research. Abai Village was selected as a case because of its potential as an ecotourism site in Lower Kinabatangan where several ecotourism activities were run by the locals especially women.

All the informants were asked about their involvement in ecotourism related activities and the socio-economic benefits that they have received. The interviews were usually conducted at the interviewee's house and they gave full support to co-operate with the researchers. All the interviews were recorded after the researchers gain informants' permissions. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour. The interviewees preferred to speak in Malay as it is a common language in their daily lives. After the interviews, the raw data were analysed using thematic analysis technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

According to Pookhao (2014), ecotourism is an alternative form of tourism and was regarded as a development tool that promotes ecological conservation. On the other hand, tourism has a potential to transform the community lives to be better and it has less impact on local socio-cultural have been discussed by the previous tourism researchers (Mbaiwa, 2004; Sebastian & Rajagopalan, 2009). The findings of this study have indicated that ecotourism activities in Abai Village have been empowered women in Abai Village in the following manners:

Most of the ecotourism activities in Abai Village are engaged or managed by women

In Abai, all ecotourism activities are commonly managed by the local community and could be regarded as an example of community-based tourism activities. As remarked by the community leader (informant 7) all the ecotourism related activities are under the management of Community Abai Project also known as CAP. Majority of the CAP members are women and local youths. The homestay programme under the management of CAP was responsible for all the ecotourism activities. To date, there are four households actively participated in the homestay programmes. Consequently, women participation is vital for the survival of this homestay programme for its sustainability. Through homestay programme, there are a number of ecotourism products or activities that become tourist attractions such as river cruise, wildlife viewing, firefly watching, boat service, tree planting or restoration activities, local traditional foods, cultural performances, showcasing traditional method of catching prawns, and showing mass flowering of *Mangifera* (a prominent species around the Lower Kinabatangan Sanctuary). These activities are listed under the homestay programme and have been packaged to fulfil the tourists' demands. Normally, the tourists are free to choose their preferred package whenever they decide to stay in the homestay programme. This study indicated that, women majority being a housewife and homestay operators voluntarily take charge in providing good hospitality to the tourists or guests who stayed over at their homestays. Most of the outdoor activities however are managed and operated by the local youths as well as by the head of households. This is not to say that women are not involved in outdoor activities, rather they become the backbone to their family by providing most of the homestay services or aspects such as preparing food four times a day for the tourists and their family members. Thus, women participation in ecotourism activities, especially in the homestay programme of Abai, is vital because of their hard work and sacrifices.

Sign of social empowerment: There is stronger collaboration between CAP and stakeholders in ecotourism activities enhancing women participation

Prior to the establishment of homestay programme in Abai Village in year 2001, the local community agreed to participate in homestay programme and they were working together with external stakeholders. WWF Sabah was the first NGO which introduced the homestay programme at Abai with the hope that the poverty level of the local community could be decreased. The social empowerment in the establishment of homestay programme could be seen where the four households especially women with permission from their

husbands agreed to participate in the homestay programme. The reason why they were interested to participate in homestay programme was claimed by a female Homestay Coordinator. She claimed that:

“With the introduction of this programme, we became interested to participate for the main reason being our involvement in this programme could enhance our livelihood and economic achievement” (Informant 3, 2014).

With the co-operation and collaboration of the NGO and local community themselves, the homestay programme was successfully established and fully operated by the locals at Abai in 2001. This finding supported Park & Kim's study in year 2014, where there was a greater and stronger collaboration among the stakeholder for tourism development. It was obvious that, without women's participation, the homestay programme could not be smoothly implemented. This is because almost every hospitality services need women's roles in order to please the guest. For instance, the services such as preparing traditional foods, hand-made handicrafts, cleanliness of the homestays, and forest restoration project such as tree nursery in Abai Village were fully dependent on women participation.

Moreover, women roles at Abai were also significant in the social aspect of community development process. It was evident that CAP introduced donation initiative where it was integrated in the homestay programme. This initiative was aimed to enhance the social cohesion and livelihoods of the local people of Abai. In this initiative, 10 per cent of the homestay income per day will be charged by the CAP from every homestay operators in the village. This initiative was supported by the women homestay operators and they significantly contribute to the success of this initiative. The collection funds will be used for community development purposes and for the homestay operation within the village. The CAP treasurer noted that, “the raised funds will be used for homestay maintenance and other livelihoods programme within the village” (women informant 1). Thus, social empowerment through fund raising initiative among the locals was an example of the empowerment framework suggested by Scheyvens (1999). This finding is in line with her suggestion in the context of ecotourism activities.

Sign of economic empowerment: Women as homestay operators' gains economic empowerment through ecotourism activities

Ecotourism activities especially homestay programmes, was perceived by the informants to have an impact on their livelihoods and has empowered them in terms of economic benefits because of their participation in ecotourism activities. A female homestay operator agreed that homestay

programme in Abai was providing economic benefits and acts an alternative socio-economic activity for the villagers. The following comments from the informant explain the situation:

“When the homestay was set up here, as a homestay operator, our economic status has increased. Previously, the marine resources like fish resources had increased but currently it has worsened and decreased. Thus, community-based tourism activities [homestay programme] have helped us to get some income. On the other hand, many of us tend to be involved in this programme because of the potential income from the programme” (Informant 4, 2014).

Moreover, other women informants (informants 1, 2, 3) who are also the homestay operators have supported the view that economic benefits from the homestay programme enhanced their livelihoods by improving the cash earned. An equal opportunity in the homestay programme at Abai Village provided a fair distribution of additional income among the homestay operators within the Abai’s community. As Scheyvens (1999) suggested that “ecotourism brings lasting economic gains to a local community”. Similarly, these findings supported the previous study where 34 CBT projects in Nicaragua, Central America provided employment opportunities to the local people as well as economic benefits such as income generated (Zapata, Hall, Lindo, & Vanderschaeghe, 2011).

Sign of psychological empowerment: Most of the women gains self-esteem through ecotourism activities

This study also observed that women at Abai Village strongly supported ecotourism activities since it brought them psychological empowerment where passive participation changed to active participation. In-depth interviews with women informants show that they agreed to this statement and they were largely encouraged by their family members as well as by external parties such as NGOs to participate actively. The community leader (informant 7) of Abai Village claimed that the local residents presently faced transformation in terms of their level of confidence with their daily activities. He also stressed that with the introduction of ecotourism activities in Abai Village, the benefits from those activities are not only restricted to ecotourism participants but to the whole of Abai’s community.

In Abai Village, homestay operators are dominated mostly by women because these women have good skills on hand-made handicraft and traditional cooking. During the fieldworks, the researchers enjoyed watching

the process of making handicraft by the women at their homestays. They were good at making a variety of handicrafts which showed their way of lives such as making traditional fishing equipment. Evidently, this shows they have a sense of pride about their culture and traditions through handicraft making. Doing these kind of activities in the homestay programme has clearly demonstrated the psychological empowerment gained by the women at Abai. As Scheyvens's (1999) claimed that self-esteem of the community members were enhanced because they were recognised by the outsiders especially tourists and guests and this will make them want to be enthusiastically involved.

Sign of political empowerment: Women have full rights in decision making in the homestay programme

At the local level, there was a good relationship between community leader and the other ecotourism participants particularly in dealing with the ecotourism management. In this study, researchers have observed that there was a good understanding between these two groups which benefited the whole community if the relationship is long lasting and sustainable. In CAP management, women participants have full rights in decision making process in the ecotourism related activities. Take for instance this particular woman homestay programme coordinator who is also the head of CAP organisation. As the homestay coordinator, she claimed that they are able to play multiple roles such as domestic workers and homestay operators. The political structure at the local village provides enough rights to women to express their views and opinions related ecotourism activities and the homestay management. This finding is in line with Park & Kim's (2014) study where local community have rights to say 'no' to any development plans which did not reflect community wants and needs and clearly indicated that political empowerment among the local community has been realised.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

The results of this study suggest that ecotourism activities through homestay programme significantly influenced women participation actively and empowered them socially, psychologically, economically and politically in Abai Village, Lower Kinabatangan, Sabah. Moreover, this study also suggests that Abai Village can be a form of sustainable tourism destination and development. This is because the collaboration of local people with the external stakeholders has existed. From this study, it was evident that outside stakeholder like WWF has played a significant role to help the local community to enhance their livelihood by having homestay programmes.

Tosun (2000) viewed that community-based ecotourism operation in the developing countries need more attention and reinforcement from the outside stakeholders compared to developed nations.

This study was provided both, theoretical and policy implications. The theoretical implication shows that the concept of empowerment suggested by Scheyvens, (1999) has been fully utilized in the context of ecotourism development in Abai Village. It is also shown that the Scheyvens's Empowerment Framework for this study is applicable. This study has achieved the objectives where ecotourism activities have enhanced local community participation especially women, which then have empowered them. Moreover, this study has to some extent fulfilled the research gap in tourism studies with regards to women participation and empowerment issues in ecotourism activities in Malaysia. For the policy implications, this study suggested that local tourism stakeholders especially Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment Sabah should play a significant role by providing more assistance to the local community at Abai in order to sustain their active involvement. It is hoped that, external stakeholders like NGOs should also support the local community in terms of providing substantial knowledge and training related to ecotourism and homestay programmes.

This research has clearly addressed the four dimensions or signs of empowerment of women (Scheyvens, 1999) in ecotourism activities of Abai Village. Thus, it is suggested that the signs of women empowerment in ecotourism activities in Abai Village, Lower Kinabatangan, Sabah, could be enhanced in sustainable manners in the near future.

On the other hand, the study has several limitations. First, the present study covered only a village in Lower Kinabatangan area of Sabah, which is the Abai Villages. Other villages, such as Sukau, Batu Puteh, Bilit, Dagat and Sri Ganda are also located within the Lower Kinabatangan area but there are limited empirical research conducted in these villages, thus there is a need to do more research on women participation in ecotourism activities. In addition, our observation revealed that the most popular ecotourism activities in these villages are largely dominated by women, and more empirical research are needed to document their contributions to the tourism industry in Sabah, Malaysia. Second, this study only focused on the positive empowerment factors for women in ecotourism activities in Abai Village, but did not study the disempowerment brought by ecotourism to the women involved in ecotourism activities, hence, future research could be useful to identify this issue.

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